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ABSTRACT

Multicultural education in the 1990s goes beyond the histories of particular ethnic and cultural groups to examine the context of oppression itself. The historical foundations of this modern conception of multicultural education are exemplified in the lives of African American women, whose stories are largely untold. Aspects of current theory and practice in curriculum transformation and multicultural education have roots in the activities of African American women. This paper discusses the life and contributions of Mary McLeod Bethune as an example of the interconnections among feminism, education, and social activism in early 20th century American life. (Author/EH)

# MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE: FEMINIST, EDUCATOR, AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST



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ABSTRACT

Multicultural education in the 1990s goes beyond the histories of particular ethnic and cultural groups to examine the context of oppression itself. The historical foundations of this modern conception of multicultural education are exemplified in the lives of African American women, whose stories are largely untold. I will argue that aspects of current theory and practice in curriculum transformation and multicultural education have roots in the activities of African American women. This paper discusses the life and contributions of Mary McLeod Bethune as an example of the interconnections among feminism, education, and social activism in early twentieth century American life.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the life and contributions of Mary McLeod Bethune in the context of feminism, education, and social activism during the early twentieth century. Mary McLeod Bethune was born in 1875, Black, poor, female, and southern. She lived during a critical period in US history, bordered by the years following the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the civil rights and the feminist movements. I will tell Mary McLeod Bethune's story, placing her at the center of prominent African American women and men of this period of United States history. I will make explicit the connections among her applications of feminism, transformative knowledge in education, and social action.

Multicultural education in the twenty-first century goes beyond the histories of particular ethnic and cultural groups to investigate the context of oppression itself which takes into account the position of the knower in terms of race, class, and gender and how positionality influences what is known (Code, 1991). The historical foundations of this conception of multicultural education have roots in the activities of African American women, whose stories have often been silenced, lost, or untold (Skorapa, 1989). Bethune's story, while extraordinary, is only one among many such stories.

### Feminism

When I use the term feminism in this paper, I am referring to feminism as it was defined and practiced by prominent African American women who were Bethune's contemporaries. Feminist principles have traditionally been an integral part of African American culture. According to Patricia Hill Collins, the origins of Black feminism lie in "...the lived experiences that enslaved African women brought with them." (1993, p. 408).

Because Black women in many ways had equal status with men in their own communities, Black feminism focused on a wider community and was "...based on notions of fairness, equality, and justice for all human beings, not just African American women" (Collins, 1993, p. 418).

The breadth of African American women's conceptualizations of feminism contrasts with a narrower version practiced by White women of the same era. For example, White feminists conceptualized the suffrage movement as concentrating primarily on winning the vote for White women. At the same time, Black suffragists consistently advocated voting rights for all Americans. According to Giddings, "...Afro-Americans maintained a political philosophy of universal suffrage, while Whites, including women, advocated a limited, educated suffrage after the Civil War" (p. 119).

Because of their lived experiences, and their position in the cultural, social, economic and political fabric of American life, Black women were often in a unique position to observe and comment on the ways in which knowledge about gender and race was constructed. When White feminists spoke about women, it wasn't hard for Black women to see that they were talking about White women. When national leaders spoke about all men being created equal, it was obvious to Black women that they meant men and not women (Hull, Scott, and Smith, 1982). In the context of the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender, Black women developed strategies to protect themselves and their families. Collins writes,

> As mothers, othermothers, teachers, and sisters, Black women were central to the retention and transformation of the Afrocentric worldview. ...these self-definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups (1990, p 10-11).

Transformative Knowledge in Education

When I use the phrase "transformative knowledge" I mean the type of knowledge which Banks (1993 ) describes as "concepts, paradigms, themes and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and that expand the historical and literary canon" (p. 9). Banks defines mainstream academic knowledge as consisting of "...traditional and established knowledge in the behavioral and social sciences" (p. 9). Transformative knowledge challenges mainstream academic knowledge by questioning the basic assumptions on which that knowledge is based. For example, mainstream knowledge traditionally held that women were more suited than men to be

caregivers of children. Transformative knowledge suggests that women and men are equally suited to care for children (Rich, 1986; Berry, 1993). A major tenet of transformative knowledge is that knowledge is shaped and influenced by the particular circumstances of the knower. Lorraine Code (1991) maintains that knowledge is both objective and subjective, and that infinite variations of this objective/subjective continuum contribute to the knowledge constructed by the knower.

During Bethune's lifetime, much of mainstream academic knowledge held that Black families were dysfunctional, disorganized, and inferior to White families (Giddings, 1984; Jones, 1985). Bethune was transformative because she knew Black families were not inferior, based on her own experiences, both subjective and objective. It was popular knowledge in the part of the US where Bethune was raised that African Americans could and should live separately from Whites. She was transformative in that she believed in racial integration in all aspects of life. Bethune lived in a state where integration was illegal, yet she never deviated from this principle. At Bethune-Cookman College, the faculty, the students and the Board of Trustees were interracial. Bethune insisted that all of the women's club meetings and conventions that she was involved in be interracial (Holt, 1964). She was transformative because she challenged mainstream and popular knowledge, and because she acted on the basis of that knowledge in order to effect social change.

Social Action

The term social action in this paper refers to the extent to which Bethune, in the context of her time, was able to educate, to build an institution, to influence national policy, and to make progress in changing mainstream perceptions of women. Social action was the logical extension of transformational knowledge about race and gender for Black feminist educators of the early twentieth century. Susan Smith (1993) states:

> Social welfare movements...were most visible from 1890 to 1950, during the period of legalized segregation in the United States. Overall, Black Americans had to find their own solutions to the poverty, ill health, and education needs of their communities. Organized Black club women, many of whom were educators, laid the foundation for the social welfare movements of the twentieth century (p. 1086).

Aspects of current theory and practice of knowledge construction in multicultural education have roots in the activities of African American women such as Bethune, who worked relentlessly throughout their lives to

construct a safer, more just world. I begin with a short biography of Mary McLeod Bethune, and then discuss her activities in the context of feminism, education, and social activism. Finally I make explicit the links between Bethune's life and current theory and practice in multicultural education.

## MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE

There is some confusion regarding the true facts about Bethune's life. According to Olga Skorapa (1989), the "existing biological narrative is fundamentally the product of myth makers, Bethune herself among them..." (p. 33-34). In her doctoral dissertation, Skorapa asserts that Bethune's personal papers are not available for public examination or for scholarly research. She describes the difficulty she had in accessing Bethune's papers at the Bethune Foundation, the Bethune Museum and Archives, the National Council of Negro Women and at the Bethune-Cookman College Archives. She reports that other researchers interested in Bethune's private letters and diaries have had similar difficulties in gaining access to materials. Skorapa cautions that any published accounts of Bethune's life or her work, including the biographies I used to construct the short biography that follows, are not verifiable at this time.

### The Early Years

Mary Jane McLeod was born July 10, 1875 near Mayesville, South Carolina. She was the fifteenth of seventeen children born to Sam and Patsy (McIntosh) McLeod, who were former slaves. In 1885, at age 10, Mary enrolled in the Trinity Presbyterian Mission School near her home. In 1888, at age 12 , Bethune enrolled in the Scotia Seminary in North Carolina, and graduated in 1894 at the age of 19. She supported herself, in part, from a scholarship given to her by a seamstress and teacher who lived in Denver, Colorado. Perkins (1988) notes, "She worked all seven years at domestic and service jobs at the school in order to supplement her scholarship" (p. 31).

She spent the next year in Chicago at the Moody Institute for Home and Foreign Missions, again with a scholarship from Miss Chrissman in Denver (Holt, 1963). She was the only African American enrolled at the Moody Institute, which had a student body numbering more than a thousand students (Holt, 1964). It was her dream to go to Africa to be a missionary; however, she was turned down twice by the Mission Board. They were apparently reluctant to send a Negro missionary to Africa (Holt, 1964).

## The School Years

In 1896 and 1897 Bethune taught at Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia. She married Albertus Bethune in 1898, and their son Albert was born in 1899. She stayed home with her son for a year, then became restless and anxious to return to public life (Lerner, 1973). Bethune had been inspired by her work with Lucy Laney at the Haines Institute, and she became determined to open a similar school for Negro girls. She taught for several more years, and searched and dreamed of a site for her school. She later wrote about this period of her life:

> I found a shabby four-room cottage, for which the owner wanted a rental of eleven dollars a month. My total capital was a dollar and a half, but I talked him into trusting me until the end of the month for the rest. This was in September. A friend let me stay at her home, and I plunged into the job of creating something from nothing (Lerner, p. 138).

On October 3, 1904, Bethune opened the Daytona Education and Industrial Institute in Daytona, Florida, with "five little girls, and a dollar and a half, and faith in God" (Smith, 1993 p. 114). In 1923, the school merged with Cookman College to become Bethune-Cookman Institute. The new school was named for Bethune and for Alfred Cookman, who was a White Methodist minister. Bethune (1973) , in an article entitled "College on a Garbage Dump", tells a story about buying a piece of land for her school. She spoke with the owner of the property who agreed to sell her the land for $250. He eventually accepted five dollars as a down payment, with the remainder due in two years. Bethune sold ice cream and sweet potato pies to construction workers to raise the five dollar down payment (Bethune, 1973). In 1941 Bethune-Cookman Institute officially became a liberal arts college. Bethune wrote proudly about her school:

> We have fourteen modern buildings, a beautiful campus of thirty-two acres, an enrollment in regular and summer sessions of 600 students, a faculty and staff of thirty-two, and 1,800 graduates. The college property, now valued at more than $800,000, is entirely unencumbered (p. 142).

## The Women's Club Movement

During the time Bethune was building and supporting her school, she also became heavily involved in the women's club movement. The Black women's club movement emerged in response to the ever-increasing need for social programs in the African American community to resist the

debilitating effects of racism (Salem, 1993). Bethune joined the National Association for Colored Women in 1912, ostensibly as a way to get publicity and support for her school (Collier-Thomas, 1993). In 1917 she became president of the Florida Federation of Colored Women; in 1920 she founded the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women; in 1924 she became president of the National Association for Colored Women, "...the highest office to which a Black woman of that era could then aspire..." (Smith, E., p. 118).

Collier-Thomas (1993) writes that Bethune became concerned about the fragmented focus of local women's groups, the "inordinate amount of time and effort raising money for male-dominated organizations and male-defined causes..." and the "...lack of a clear feminist focus and commitment to women's issues and especially to working-class and poor Black women" ( p. 854). In 1934 she founded the National Council of Negro Women. Prior to that time, each of the regional and local women's clubs operated more or less independently, or were affiliated with White women's clubs. Skorapa (1989) suggests that the various local and national affiliates were often in disagreement , "...apparently as a result of regional and class conflict..." (p.76) According to Collier-Thomas, director of the National Archives for Black Women's History and of the Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial Museums, "the development of the national council concept was a stroke of genius" (1993, p. 862). The National Council for Negro Women published a newsletter, Telefact, and a journal, The Aframerican Women's Journal, and used those publications to unite and mobilize more than a million African American women for social action at the national level for the first time in United States history. The Council, under Bethune's leadership, became involved in working to end educational segregation, lynching, and discrimination in voting rights (Skorapa, 1989).

## The Roosevelt Years

As a result of the experience and exposure she gained as president of a college and as president of The National Association of Negro Women and subsequently president of the newly formed National Council of Negro Women, Bethune became heavily involved in national politics (Skorapa, 1989). In 1935 she became special advisor on minority affairs to President Roosevelt and she was appointed director of the National Youth Administration's Division of Negro Affairs in 1936. There were 21 million young people in the United States between the ages of 16 and 24 in 1936. Five million of those were not in school and not employed. Two times as many black youth as White youth were on public subsidy (Berry, 1982). As a result of the work of Bethune and her colleagues in the National Youth

Administration, "150,000 black youths went to high school and 60,000 went to college and graduate school under the student aid program" (p. 290).

Bethune convened the group of African American men who would become the 'Black Cabinet' of the Roosevelt administration. She wanted to unite as many of the African American members of the federal government as she could in a plan to secure federal jobs for Negro men and women. Bethune felt it was imperative that the perspectives of Blacks be represented in policy making and program planning at the national level, and worked throughout the later part of her life with the women's club movement and the National Youth Administration to get African Americans hired for federal jobs.

It is difficult to get perspective on the sheer quantity of arenas in which Bethune had influence. She was the president of a college, the highest ranking Black woman in the Roosevelt administration, and she had a personal relationship with both Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt. In 1942 , when Bethune was named special assistant to the US delegation at the founding conference of the United Nations, she was one of only two women of color who attended the international conference in an official capacity. At the time of her death she held 11 honorary advanced degrees from various colleges and universities (Holt, p. 291). According to Elaine Smith, she was

> ...the preeminent leader at large from 1936 to 1945....She was tied to the leadership of the frontline organizations, including the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and she was held in the highest esteem in Black academia (p. 121).

## BETHUNE AS FEMINIST, EDUCATOR, AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST

Bethune had enormous influence in many different spheres of activity. In this section, I will examine the breadth of her activities in three different contexts: as feminist, as educator, and as activist. While it may be useful to separate those arenas for discussion, they were not separate in Bethune's life. Her feminist perspectives were central to her educational goals, and both were central to her activities for social change.

### Bethune As Feminist

Feminist principles are an integral part of African American culture. Collins writes, "African women were socialized to be independent, self-reliant, and resourceful" (p. 408). Bethune had ample opportunities in her own life to observe the behavior and attitudes of powerful and determined

African American women. Her mother was the driving force in her family, and the one responsible for buying the "first five acres of the family farm" (Holt, p. 52). Her mother was also responsible for giving her daughter that strong pride in her race. Holt (1964) notes : "Patsy McLeod had been fiercely determined... all her sons and daughters had the same father, and all were proudly black" (p. 2). Elaine Smith describes Mary McLeod's sense of herself:

> She saw herself as God's very own precious child--an equal to any other in the human family. Regardless of the limitations society imposed on her because she exhibited the physical appearance of her African forebears--kinky-textured hair, flaring nose, full lips, and a coal-black complexion--features that even black America's middle class disesteemed; regardless of her sex, her rural southern background, and her lingering poverty, this woman believed in God and in herself (p. 114).

Bethune is viewed as a feminist both by her peers and by more contemporary authors. Holt, Bethune's friend and biographer, named Bethune a "zealous feminist...[h]er preoccupation with the development of a Negro womanhood was an incessant urge" (p. 52). McCluskey, a more contemporary feminist, called Bethune ..."a highly focused woman who understood the limitations placed on her by racial and gender assumptions, which she exploited to her own advantage" (p. 113). Bethune's feminism centered on the dilemmas of Black family life and the roles played by Black women in protecting and strengthening their families against the effects of oppression. She came to believe that Negro girls urgently needed education to help them in this very important role.

Bethune dreamed and schemed to put Black women in positions of power at the local and national level (E. Smith, 1993). Her perception of the role Black women should play in national politics was consistent with the role she perceived them to play in their families and communities. She wanted Black women to play a role in government because she believed their wisdom and experience were required in order to ensure the survival of the race. Bethune had a sign outside her office at Bethune-Cookman College that "was a poignant summation of her goals and aspirations for the girls: Self-Respect, Self-Reliance, Race-Pride" (McCluskey, p. 123).

## Bethune As Educator

In a college commencement address, Bethune said, "Education is the great American adventure, the largest public enterprise in the United States, the country's most important business" (Holt, p. 192). Education was at the center of Bethune's work to end race, class and gender inequality. Her life's

work, as founder of a school and a national women's club, as a college president, as advisor to a United States president, she expressed her conviction that education was critical to the survival of the African American community (McCluskey, 1989). Many of Bethune's contemporaries shared her convictions regarding the critical need for education in the Black community. Perkins (1993) makes this point:

> Viewed by society as neither humans nor citizens, they had to work together to 'uplift' the race. This effort required the contributions of both men and women. Consequently, as the Black community sought to obtain whatever education was available to them...,the education of women was included (p. 382).

Patricia Coleman-Burns (1989) cites three reasons for the African American cultural emphasis on the education of Black women: (a.) traditionally and historically, the status of the Black child was determined by the mother; (b.) Black women had more access to employment and to higher status employment than Black men; and (c.) it was believed that Black women were the primary teachers of culture.

Much of (White) American society believed that only White men required a formal education appropriate to their status as leaders of society. Women and Black men had no need for formal education, because they were excluded from participation in the public life of the nation. White women who lived during the early years of the twentieth century were educated for the private life of housekeeping and childrearing (Perkins, L,1993). Although not universally held, there were substantial differences between the educational aspirations of White and Black women. Perkins makes this distinction:

> During a period when women of the larger society were universally ridiculed for educational aspirations, within the black community, African American women received encouragement and praise for their educational efforts (p. 382).

An urgent need for formal education for African Americans, both women and men, led eventually to an intense debate within the African American community about the nature of the curriculum for Black students in higher education. Booker T. Washington, one of the major figures in this controversy, was president of Tuskegee Institute, a trade school for African American youth. He was strongly in favor of industrial education which would prepare students for work. He believed that gainful employment for all African Americans would eventually lead to racial equality (Perkins, C., 1988). W. E. B. DuBois, another eminent scholar, maintained that African

Americans should be trained as scholars and intellectuals who would be able to move into and influence the White power structure.

The two schools of thought soon polarized into mutually exclusive positions: The accomodationists, represented by Booker T. Washington, believed that the race could best be advanced by the diligent work of each individual African American, tolerating for the moment the existing social and political system. The protest movement, exemplified by W. E. B. DuBois, spoke out against race oppression, and advocated "militant protest and agitation" (Rudwick, p. 63).

Although the media and the community found sharp distinctions between the views of Washington and DuBois, both of these men were constrained by the times. Louis Harlan (cited in Skorapa, 1989) noted that Washington was exceptional in his ability to bridge the White and Black communities. Perhaps he was presenting a perspective that would be acceptable to the philanthropists who were funding his work. Skorapa (1989) suggests that Bethune learned this skill from Washington in order to get support from the charitable organizations they both depended upon to continue their transformative activities.

Bethune's philosophy, manifested in her school and in her life, manifested aspects of both positions. The motto of her school echoed Washington's Tuskegee motto: head, hand, and heart. Her curriculum emphasized vocational skills that would enable her students to find employment. At the same time, Bethune agreed with DuBois that African American youth should be educated to take their places alongside White intellectuals (Perkins, C.,1988). Bethune knew that her female and male students would have to take equal responsibility for the maintenance of their families and communities. Black women in particular could not afford the luxury of job specialization; they needed education for economic as well as intellectual reasons.

Bethune saw no mutually exclusive categories of education; she could imagine a school where many objectives could be met at the same time. Her thinking about the education debate can be described in modern terms as 'both/and' thinking. Collins characterizes both/and thinking as the "...art of being simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing apart from it" (p. 207). She also uses this term to describe a plurality rather than a duality to represent knowledge. Both knowledge and experience, for example, make up the phenomenon called knowing; both thought and action are necessary to the survival of African Americans, and both reason and emotion must be present in order to represent the lived experience of African American women. From this perspective, the debate between followers of Washington

and of DuBois can be described as "either/or" thinking. Either/or thinking is characterized by mutually exclusive categories, such as male/female, black/White, powerful/powerless, or, as in the Great Debate, intellectual/vocational.

Bethune As Social Activist

The African American community has a long history of taking care of its own. Service to others is and has been a cornerstone of Black culture. According to Jacqueline Jones, (1985) Black women, especially middle-class Black women, saw themselves as social activists no matter what work they performed. Sharon Harley, (1982) states that the

> ...vast majority of local black teachers and former teachers who involved themselves in the women's club movement...did so because they believed, as did most formally educated women at the time, that they had a special responsibility to their respective communities which they alone could fulfill (p. 256).

Bethune believed, along with many of her contemporaries, that the education of African American girls and women was the key to eventual equality. She wrote (cited in McCluskey, 1989) "Very early in my life, I saw the vision of what our women might contribute to the growth and development of the race--if they were given a certain type of intellectual training. I longed to see women--Negro women--hold in their hands diplomas that bespoke achievement" ( p. 119). Bethune's activism took the form of doing whatever she could to improve the lives and possibilities of African American girls and women. After 1936, this meant a life in the national spotlight, as the highest ranking Black women in federal government. From this position of influence she worked diligently to get African Americans appointed to positions of leadership. Smith (1993) notes that in 1940, there was only one Black federal judge in the United States and he was in the Virgin Islands. Except for the Black Cabinet members, who were mainly in advisory positions, Black Americans were in essence unrepresented in federal government.

At the same time Bethune was a tireless campaigner, fund raiser and invited speaker. She was very active in the women's club movement, in the administration of her school, and in social welfare agencies devoted to Black women and their families.

## BETHUNE AND CURRENT PRACTICE

### The Dimensions of Multicultural Education

Banks (1993) identifies four dimensions of multicultural education: content integration, the knowledge construction process, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture. Bethune's views on feminism, education and social activism are consistent with Banks' dimensions and current practice in multicultural education.

Content integration. Content integration refers to the practice of including in the curriculum content from a wide variety of cultural groups and points of view. Bethune's ideas on education guaranteed that her school would include a curriculum that reflected both the lives of her students and the lives of the dominant culture. Although she lived before the term "both/and" was coined, she demonstrated pluralistic thinking in that she felt strongly that a proper education for Black students must include skills for getting along in White society and knowledge that would promote race pride and race consciousness. She believed it was important for Black women to learn about their racial history. She wrote, "Negro women have always known struggle. This heritage is just as much to be desired as any other. Our girls should be taught to appreciate it and welcome it " (cited in McCluskey, p. 120).

The knowledge construction process. "...relates to the extent to which teachers help students understand, investigate, and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways that knowledge is constructed" (Banks, 1993, p. 23). The knowledge construction process has been an integral part of Black feminist thought. Black women in the United States have traditionally viewed the world from a unique perspective, both Black and female, with all the historical implications of those locations. This perspective facilitates the awareness that race, gender, and social class, among other factors, are socially constructed by those who have power and privilege to protect. Bethune wrote: "...our more advanced thinkers now are beginning to point out that greatness is very largely a social accident, and almost always socially supported" (cited in Lerner, p. xxxv).

An equity pedagogy refers to the extent to which teachers attend to the wide range of learning styles and educational needs of their individual students (Banks, 1993). Equity pedagogy is reflected in Bethune's life-long principle of non-segregation. As a social activist, Bethune was a determined integrationist. She believed adamantly in the equality of the races and sexes. Holt, her biographer, states:

> In spite of the rigid segregation laws of Florida, she never submitted to them. At her school no one had precedence over another, and there was never any question of this seat or that seat, this aisle or that aisle. She violated such laws with impunity and was never called to account by any of the administrators of such laws; she simply refused to acknowledge their existence, so far as she was concerned they did not exist. (Holt, pp. 85-86)

An empowering school culture is a school environment which advocates the equal participation of all of its members. This speaks to another of Bethune's basic principles: "...that what was good for one was good for all, the rights of one were the rights of all" (Holt, p. 141). Bethune advocated equal rights, nonsegregation and gender equity throughout her long and impressive career as an educator and as an activist. She came to believe that education should teach young people to resist oppression and develop "...an attitude of protest that will change the environment for one more worthy" (cited in Perkins, C., 1988,p. 34).

## CONCLUSION

Mary McLeod Bethune was a feminist, an educator, and a social activist within a community that supported and applauded her accomplishments. She conducted her activities within a larger society which constrained her movements and discounted her ideals. She learned to live her life ..."apart from racism without being oblivious to or untouched by it" (Jones, p. 9). Her story fills in one blank space in the historical foundations of multicultural education. Her story stands next to the stories of prominent African American men who laid the groundwork for the current multicultural education movement.

Multicultural education of the 1990's acknowledges and incorporates the contributions of Black women, Black men, White women and men, Latinos and Latinas, Filipinos and Filipinas, gays and lesbians, into a kaleidoscope which represents many different versions of the world (Banks, 1992). Alice Walker wrote, "I believe the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story" (Collins, p. 37). Mary McLeod Bethune's story is a piece of that truth, and I am profoundly changed in retelling it.

## NOTES

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